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SUBJECT: CENTRAL ELECTION COMMISSION CHAIRMAN OFFERS VIEWS
ON MARCH REGIONAL ELECTIONS, RFFE

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns. Reason: 1.4 (b).

Summary

¶1. (C) Central Election Commission Chairman Aleksandr Veshnyakov on February 28 reviewed with Ambassador the state-of-play in advance of elections to be held in fourteen regions on March 11. Key points:

- average of seven parties registered in each region;
- average of five candidates competing for each slot in single-mandate races;
- Yabloko's problems in St. Petersburg the by-product of strict interpretation of the law, local political climate, Yabloko's administrative problems;
- elections are becoming very expensive;

Veshnyakov was cautiously optimistic he will be re-elected Chairman when his term expires at the end of March, and endorsed the work of the RFFE in election monitoring. End summary.

Regional Elections: Summary Figures

¶2. (C) Central Election Commission (CEC) Chairman Aleksandr Veshnyakov interrupted a February 28 session devoted to resolving three complaints about the March 11 regional elections in order to offer the Ambassador his views on the election process. The number of parties registered for the 14-district, March 11 elections ranges from five to eight, Veshnyakov said. In those regions still staging single-mandate races, an average of five candidates are slated to compete for each slot. United Russia, For a Just Russia, the Communist Party, and the Liberal Democratic Party have passed muster in all fourteen districts. Patriots of Russia has been registered in eleven races, the Union of Right Forces in seven contests, and Yabloko in four elections.

SPS, Yabloko Problems

¶3. (C) Veshnyakov noted that SPS had encountered registration difficulties in Samara, Pskov, Dagestan, Vologda, and Tyumen.

The CEC had reversed the Samara regional election commission's decision, but saw no reason to do so in the

other contests. SPS had admitted to the CEC that its failure to be registered in Tyumen was the result of an oversight by an SPS official.

¶ 14. (C) Veshnyakov had traveled to Pskov in response to Yabloko's allegation that it had been forced from the race. He found no substance to the complaint. In response to the Ambassador's inquiry, Veshnyakov noted that the party's well-publicized failure to be registered in St. Petersburg was the by-product of "extremely strict registration standards" and poor administrative work by Yabloko.

Veshnyakov termed the 90 million ruble registration deposit (available to parties that do not want to gather signatures in order to qualify for the ballot) "too high." It was 1.5 times higher than the deposit required to participate in a federal election, he noted. Veshnyakov scored as well the procedure used for vetting signatures, which he thought was too strict, and forced Yabloko to fabricate signatures in order to qualify. The election process in St. Petersburg was "not well organized," Veshnyakov summed up.

Pressure in St. Petersburg

¶ 15. (C) Elections in Russia were increasingly expensive affairs, Veshnyakov said. As of February 20, the six registered parties in St. Petersburg had a combined campaign war chest of 434 million rubles (approximately USD 15 million). For a Just Russia's share totaled 200 million rubles, 90 million of which had been used for the registration deposit. United Russia's current account in St. Petersburg totaled 120 million rubles, which it could spend as it chose. The conduct of the St. Petersburg election to date had convinced Veshnyakov that the State Duma should

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re-examine provisions of the electoral law that allowed local authorities latitude in establishing registration and campaign finance benchmarks.

¶ 16. (C) Behind the fierce struggle in St. Petersburg, Veshnyakov thought, was the contest between For a Just Russia and Federation Council Chairman Sergey Mironov and State Duma and United Russia Chairman Boris Gryzlov. A weak showing by Just Russia could mean that Mironov would lose title to the Federation Council Chairmanship, and that had added to the importance of the contest. The March elections were, in any event, a "dress rehearsal" for the December Duma contest, and would be watched carefully for what they would suggest about its outcome. As a result, members of the St. Petersburg regional election commission (REC) were operating in "difficult political conditions," which had led to eight complaints, to date, about decisions taken. Most had been found valid by the CEC and Veshnyakov had, accordingly, reprimanded the St. Petersburg REC. He was generally satisfied with the work of the other RECs.

Role of Law on Extremism

¶ 17. (C) Veshnyakov briefly described one of the complaints the CEC had discussed on February 28. United Russia had alleged to the Commission that an SPS campaign ad had violated the law on extremism. The offending advertisement had alleged that pensions should total 10 thousand rubles, but in fact are only 2 thousand rubles per month, which implied that United Russia was pocketing the difference. The CEC found no violation of the law in SPS's campaign advertisement.

New CEC Term

¶ 18. (C) In response to the Ambassador's question about the end

of the CEC's term on March 26, Veshnyakov described himself as "satisfied" with his current staff which had worked "professionally and responsibly." The five current members who serve on the recommendation of the Federation Council had been re-nominated. The Duma had renewed the contracts of three of its five allotted members. Veshnyakov expected that three of the Duma CEC members would be members of United Russia, with one each from the Communist Party and the Liberal Democrats. He expected that President Putin would nominate his five candidates by mid-March. Veshnyakov was cautiously optimistic that he would retain the chairmanship, and he was pleased that he had won Duma Chairman Gryzlov's agreement that the CEC chairmanship should be held by a delegate who is not a member of the governing, United Russia party. A United Russia chairman would discredit the CEC in the eyes of voters and the other political parties, Veshnyakov thought.

Role for NGO Observers

¶9. (C) The Ambassador recalled assurances Veshnyakov had given at their last meeting that political parties would be willing to sponsor NGO nominees as election observers. Subsequent statements by party leaders suggested that was not the case, he said. In his just-completed trip to St. Petersburg, representatives of United Russia, the Communist Party, For a Just Russia, the Liberal Democratic Party, and Patriots of Russia had told Veshnyakov they planned to post observers at each polling station. Such an approach, Veshnyakov thought, would require the parties to canvass for non-party observers, even in the regional elections. NGO observers would be a necessity for all parties in the national, December Duma elections, Veshnyakov maintained.

Praise for RFFE

¶10. (C) While in St. Petersburg and Pskov, Veshnyakov had inspected the hotlines operated by the Russian Federation for Free Elections (RFFE). He found them to be professionally staffed and offering concrete, objective advice to questions asked. Veshnyakov believed that RFFE would play an important role in ensuring a more neutral electoral environment.

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